

Preschool

Insights & Research

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF ROLE PLAYING

“When the children are role playing they connect so many important facets of their learning. We help them to see the world through someone else’s eyes. They literally put on someone else’s shoes. All the important social skills can start with a simple role play.”

- Gail, nursery teacher, Cambridge UK

“I like buying the food from the baker and the shop. I hand over the money and say thank you.”

- Reggie, 5

Gail’s nursery (preschool) classroom has a huge box in the middle. At first glance it seems a little out of place, exactly where you’d expect a walkway to be. You have to weave around it, as well as the many little tables and beanbag chairs. However, for Gail, what the box contains is at the very heart of the learning. So the box is very purposefully placed in the center.

The box is full of dress up clothes, props, play money and plastic food. Everything the children need to act out scenes from different walks of life. The class itself is ethnically diverse, which is sensitively mirrored in the dressing up assortment. Round the base of the box, lined up in neat rows, are pairs of shoes. As Gail says, “It’s most important that the children (literally) put on someone else’s shoes before they play.” She asserts that the older they get the more they understand the adage. When this happens, she sees the role play become gradually more sophisticated, with more complex themes and interactions.

The children start by taking on a fairly stereotypical character, as they see that person and the world from their eyes. The policeman will chase the robber; the princess will sit on her throne and drink tea; the Roman soldier stands guard against invaders.

The *aha moment* for the adults in the class is when a child takes on a persona to role play a situation that helps to resolve an issue they themselves are having. The child who pretends to be a figure of authority to give orders to someone else. As researcher Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) points out, “Compensatory play can allow a child to handle emotions. If a parent scolded a child, later in the day, that child can scold its doll, or stuffed animal.” The same principle is at play in the classroom, through expression of a wide range of emotions.

Later in the year, as play becomes more sophisticated, Gail notices that the children begin to enact more complex social interactions. They use play money and toys to buy items from a shop, mimicking a scenario they have been in countless times with parents and carers. Sometimes, these shop interactions go one step further still. In the classroom there are numerous examples of imaginary menus, shopping lists and receipts. Everything in the classroom seems to have a price listed somewhere. “I’ve been bought and sold a number of times,” laughs Janet, a nursery teaching assistant. “Sometimes I’m five pence, sometimes as much as one pound!”

The use of play money, and the transaction of goods for this money, simulates important social scenarios that teach children the value of things. Just as importantly it teaches how we communicate our need or desire for things in a polite and respectful manner. This is clearly evident in how the children treat each other in Gail’s classroom.

What does the research say?

Sutton-Smith (1997) states concisely what classroom practitioners observe on a daily basis, that role play is “an original form of the child’s practical reflection on reality” and that such play “substantially contributes to a child’s development.” This is supported by his research, and that of many others, who show that playful learning experiences, such as role play, develop a child’s “thinking, imagining, pretending, planning, wondering, doubting, remembering, guessing, hoping, experimenting, redoing and working through.”

The integration of past experiences and current feelings and needs helps children to imagine how they might act in a certain situation. Thus they can learn how such an interaction might take place amongst ‘others’, if those current feelings and needs were different.

Gail points out that most of the children in her class opt to be similar, if not the same characters most days. The child who feels most comfortable in the cowboy or chef outfit, for example, often chooses this character each time, at least at first. Sutton-Smith’s research bears this out: “All learnings must be rehearsed and a child rehearses what he or she has learned through play.” Returning to the same character facilitates this *rehearsal*.

Role play clearly enables a rehearsing of social interactions on a comfortable scale. Sutton-Smith points to the “power and identity” in children’s play, where children are safe to explore the nature of authority and responsibility, and begin to develop their own identity, and understand how it might differ from that of other people.

What the teachers say

“Very rarely during the middle part of the school day do I talk to the ‘children’. I am talking to the cook, or the policeman, or a princess. The children get fully into role and demand you talk to the character, not them. They have a wonderful way of expressing stereotypes which somehow gets to the truth. Sometimes maybe a little too close! The teacher and the parent always seem to shout. I’ve been arrested many times. I’ve been bought and sold a number of times too... but it’s all fantastic experience.”

- Janet, Gail’s teaching assistant

References

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, Mass, USA: Harvard University Press)